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Claus Bonderup

Conversations with the architect and his unique wife Anne Just, about food, art and architecture

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Anne Just

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INTRODUCTION - THE GEOMETRY OF MIRACLES, THE GARDEN OF SENSES

Ever since I was a young student and met Claus Bonderup for the first time, I have been fascinated by his work. I still remember how we turned up for a lecture of his at the Aarhus School of Architecture in the beginning of the 1980s brimming with excitement; a lecture that would end up being very short as my professor ejected him from the auditorium. Claus was not merely a classic innovative architect but also very provocative in his holistic architecture. Back then, his works were too radical for the school...

At Aalborg University, initially at the Department of Architecture & Design, and later at the Department of Civil Engineering, I have had the great pleasure of working with Claus for the last 15 years. During this time, I have had the opportunity to observe his skills as a teacher and disseminator, and I have seen the great respect he holds for young, dedicated people and witnessed the students' confidence in him.

In 2008, we wrote a small book, the "old student" and the two "young graduates" from Architecture & Design, who, I would like to emphasise, are two very special young people that have now seriously entered the frame of architectural research and teaching. Now, in the late summer of 2012, we have chosen to republish the first chapter of the book, which is about the DUCK HOUSE Claus created years ago; and we have done so for a very particular reason.

A short time ago, I was approached by the director of the 13th International Architecture Exhibition, the highly esteemed British architect, David Chipperfield, and – to put it bluntly – an architect to my and Claus' liking. Chipperfield has chosen a handful of schools of architecture and architectural universities from all over Europe, which have been invited to gather a group of students and exhibit architectural models; and I have been fortunate enough to be given this opportunity.

Chipperfield has chosen to create a response to the prestigious VIP architects' often staggeringly expensive exhibitions; he wants to make room for the new generation of up and coming architects, for the young, untested and especially talented students of architecture. During July, a group of talented students have therefore built seven architectural models that will be a part of the palette, or installation if you will, which will open in the Italian Pavilion at the end of August. It is quite extraordinary that Aalborg University has received the opportunity to exhibit for the entire period.

This occasion must most certainly be marked, and Marie, Tenna and I, along with the students, consequently decided to work with BIRD HOUSES. There are several reasons for this. One of them is that in the coming years, we will launch a number of job-oriented architectural projects within Urban Farming in which the students will initially work with the subject as master's students, but later, hopefully, as PhD students. Also, I have wished for a long time to give Claus Bonderup the recognition he deserves!

His view of architecture, his knowledge and his way of relating to architecture has influenced and inspired generations of students. Claus, if anyone, deserves to be represented at the Biennale.

Claus broke many unwritten rules with the Duck House he built for his Anne many years ago. The house has now been measured and reconstructed and has become the MOTHER house that serves as a basis for this project with its unique architectural models for the International Architecture Exhibition. Claus' Duck House has, thus, in theory and practice alike, become the foundation for the new architectural models, and his thoughts on design have contributed to a fruitful dialogue with the students in their process of creating the architectural models, which can soon be seen at the 13th International Architecture Exhibition in Venice.

Anna Marie Fisker, Aalborg 2012



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AN ARCHITECT, AN ARTIST AND A DUCK HOUSE

We asked the architect Claus Bonderup why on earth he had taken it into his head to draw a duck house?

When Claus drew the Duck House in 1985, it attracted a lot of attention, both among architects, but also from the general public. The small and unusual house quickly became very famous, and it gained publicity nationally as well as internationally, so, if Claus Bonderup had not been well-known beforehand, he certainly became just that with the Duck House.

What, then, was the underlying idea of an architect working with something as peculiar as an architect-designed house for ducks?

Now, many years later, as we are sitting in Anne Just's and Claus Bonderup's wonderful home in Hune, he is showing us the model of the Duck House, which, in spite of the many years that have passed, still exists. The Duck House, however, is no more. There is joy and light in Claus' eyes as he relates: *"This little house is built completely according to the golden section, and, when the house was placed on the lake, it faced west. When the ducks went up the stairs they could sit here..."* he points eagerly.

The ducks could sit on the west-facing stairs enjoying the evening sun and look at the park before they went to sleep in the only room of the house. Inside they could sleep in safety as the fox could not get to them. *"I chose the white colour for the house to make it reflect the buildings, Skeelslund Manor, but I did not realise how much ducks actually shit... and the house suffered much from that,"* Claus says, laughing.

Claus continues with a now famous story that is well-known among most students at the Architecture and Design education at Aalborg University: *"...the damned ducks did not want to go into the house at first."*

The story about the Duck House at Skeelslund Manor is also the story about the married couple of Anne Just and Claus Bonderup; a story that is characterised by two very strong and heavily committed professionals who have managed to develop but to a great extent also challenge one another when it comes to garden design, nature and architecture in the course of a long life. Their lives, surroundings and works are the results of two strong personalities' development of and dependence on each other's thoughts; a fantastic cooperation!

Anne Just received Skeelslund, which is a dower house at Birkelse Gods outside Aalborg, and, after having restored the buildings in 1984, she decided to do something about the large park and therefore established a lake. Determined as always, Anne Just naturally decided that the lake should also have ducks and a duck house. Claus did not mind drawing the house, and so it was that carpenter Lars Mølgaard in Åbybro was contacted by Anne Just and asked whether he would build the Duck House according to Claus' drawings; because Anne really liked the sketches and the idea of the house.

What, then, was it about the drawings that appealed to Anne? According to Claus Bonderup, the house was built in accordance with the simple geometry and the proportions that appeal to him in buildings, regardless of scale. Perhaps this is why he has saved the model; because he finds the Duck House to be the archetype of a building, a building so simple that it consists solely of four walls, an entrance and a roof; in his own words, *"so there!"*

But *"those damned ducks did not want to go into the house..."*, so Anne Just had to buy a pair of waders and went into the pond every evening, caught her ducks, shoved them into the house, and barred the entrance with a plate.

Anne Just laughs heartily as she tells us about the process of teaching the new generation of ducks to inhabit the house; that the ducks would otherwise just sit by the lake and present easy pickings for the fox' evening meal – something that the ducks, in Anne's words, *"were not quite intelligent enough to figure out."*

Anne enjoyed the many evenings when she, clad in waders, had to shove the ducks into the house and the early mornings when she would go out and open the hatch to the little Duck House, which could accommodate four ducks.

In time, however, the ducks grew so fond of the house that they would go up the stairs by themselves before going into the house to sleep. The house was not merely an architectural framework; it was actually also very functional. In the gable was a small window ensuring fresh air in the bedroom. *"Yes, the ducks needed fresh air, also in the evening and at night, so of course there was a window,"* Claus stresses.

Anne Just bought Muscovy Ducks for her lake as she, in a characteristically provident and economic manner, expected that the ducks would one day be slaughtered, and Anne Just finds Muscovy Duck to be not only tastier – there is also more meat. *“But they grew incredibly large. They were not even fully grown when they, with their beautiful plumage, could not squeeze through the hole anymore. Claus had used a mallard of mine for measurement and had drawn the house for such a duck – and then I went and bought Muscovy Ducks...”*

Claus relates that one day at the drawing office in Copenhagen, he received a call from Anne who asked: *“Claus, would you mind if I enlarged the door a bit, because the ducks cannot get in anymore?”* Claus replied that he would think about it. When he called Anne back, he said that he would not like that very much since it would ruin the proportions of the house. After several discussions, they had to slaughter the ducks and start over.

Eyes twinkling, Claus finishes the story with the admission that this is his biggest failure as an architect – having to slaughter the users. This was a case of the users not fitting the house, and Claus Bonderup, the architect, does not like this schism. His view of architecture and creating spaces is that architecture should be useful over time, also for other purposes than what was originally intended; it must be functional and give the user experiences.

He emphasises how houses in Aalborg, including the old national bank, which was originally a functional and characteristic bank space, have completely different functions today. *“Well, it works wonderfully as a university, does it not?”* It is a building that, to Claus, has an inherent simplicity and beauty, which is why the rooms, even today, can be used for other functions.

Claus uses the phrase “back to basics” a lot. He reads into this formulation that as an architect, one relates specifically to the architecture and the use of the design. However, Claus underlines that the question of function is not merely a practical matter. *“I was raised in the spirit of functionalism, which meant that when we drew a kitchen, it had to have a certain height, and the distance from the kitchen to the dining table had to be as short as possible. I found out, however, that this was no good.”* Claus explains that a beautiful path from the kitchen to the dining table, a specific room sequence, is more important than the distance.

“For example, I love to dance; and why on earth can’t dancing take place in a kitchen? That has to be what it is all about!” Claus believes that it is important to work with functions that overlap and create surprising ways of living. It appeals to him when the idea of the room is so clear that it can be *“pissed in snow.”*

“I remember in the sixties,” Claus continues, *“when people were very much into flexibility, and homes were made with no partition walls, and then everything was up to the user. Then they made some furnishing guidelines, but it turned out that the flats became identical.”* Claus does not like this approach; instead he finds that it is the architect’s responsibility to create the framework for functionality and experiences for the user. *“It might as well have been done right from the start. That is what I see as the architect’s duty.”*

Anne Just happily relates how well visitors to Skeelslund liked the Duck House. *“It was an outstanding house, and many of my guests actually liked it better than Skeelslund. They found a unique attraction there, in the lake on the large lawn.”*

THE DUCKHOUSE IS

The Duck House consists of a single room; a room defined by a number of classical, basic architectural elements: a base, a foundation, four enclosing walls, an entrance with two pillars, a window and a saddle-shaped roof supported by an architrave. From the water surface, the house rises as a sacred temple atop a magnificent staircase, overlooking the lake and ceremoniously inviting the ducks to stay by the house on the sunlit landing.

Overall, the house, its plan as well as in sectional view and its facades, forms a symmetrical composition in which its rectangular geometry and the golden section create a rhythm and a proportional contrast between the basic architectural elements. In plan view, this is evident as each step becomes gradually smaller towards the centre of the basic, rectangular surface where the stairs end in the ground plan of the house itself, and, finally, in the use of the ridge of the roof as a symmetry axis for the entire construction.

In a cross section view and in the facades, the same strict rhythm and exact proportioning is evident in the increments of the stairs, the height of the base, the weight of the wall, the slenderness of the pillar, the burden of the architrave, and the tilt of the roof; all of this ultimately combines to form an overall expression that not only mirrors the functional aspects of the house, but also reveals a profound technical insight into the way in which the architectural elements carry and support one another.

Similarly to Claus' other works, it is the tight, simple geometry that gives the house its forceful character, and this particular, strict composition and the clear architectural effects bear references to the past, when the house, as an archetype, fantasised about the act of creating spaces. Thus, the Duck House with its simple composition and architectural characteristics is not merely a duck house; it becomes an archetype for the layout of the house and the home.

Anna Marie Fisker • Marie Frier Hvejsel • Tenna Doktor Olsen Toedebriink

As in most of Claus Bonderup's buildings, the architectural characteristics of the Duck House are immensely classical and immensely simple; an architecture that is consistent with Claus' goals and visions as an architect. As he puts it: *"I think I have said it a hundred times, but when one, as a student, is in a room, it is important to see the room. Look around, make a mental disposition! Is it nice to be here? Why is it nice?"* He continues: *"Is it because the lighting is special? Has it got something to do with materials? What actually affects you?"* It is important for an architect to have this internal discussion at all times. Without it, one will never become a good architect. When I was a student we would always pace out a room, make a quick sketch and a note of why this particular room was a good one.

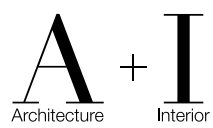
"This is what I feel I can teach the young students. I find it wonderful that they travel to Northern Italy during their first year; that they experience Palladio. Villa Rotonda is one of the most wonderful, gorgeous pieces of architecture in the world," he says, and continues, *"Villa Rotonda, to me, embodies clear architectural formulas that have been able to survive for so many centuries. It is architecture, which is still extremely interesting, which is still useful."*

Claus Bonderup also studied the works of Andrea Palladio when he was a young student of architecture. His preoccupation with Palladio's clear geometry, his primordial architecture, so to speak, is still a conscious element of Claus' own architectural work. *"Visiting Villa Rotonda still sends shivers down my spine,"* says Claus, and at the same time expresses scepticism towards working with forms without simultaneously working consciously with the functionality of the room and its intention: *"The risk is that architecture becomes a gymnastic exercise, an exercise in how far we can go, how offbeat we can make it, how weird it can become."*

To Claus Bonderup, the goal of architecture is something completely different. He believes in unique simplicity, that flexibility can create and recreate the architecture and enable it to survive and, like Palladio's Villa Rotonda, still seem spectacular even today, a spatial, architectural integrity and intent that is so strong that we understand it.

Thus, Claus Bonderup is and always has been fascinated by Palladio. To him, Palladio is the answer to many of the things that he works with, and he finds it significant that these rooms have been able to live on for so many years and believes that this simplicity also points towards the future. His point is, like the man himself, simple and strong: *"We people change all the time; and there they are, the rooms – and they still have a high use-value and an exceptional beauty that I find incredibly fascinating."*





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